

Global Governance and Global Education: Many Questions

Researcher Profile, Karen Mundy



Dr Karen Mundy, Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair, Global Governance and Comparative Education, and Co-Director of the Comparative International and Development Education Centre.
(OISE/UT Photo)

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The Global Campaign for Education (GCE) has designated 24–30 April 2006 as its “Global Action Week” to focus international attention on education as a universal right. Recently, the role of education in reducing poverty and increasing health and wellbeing has achieved greater global recognition through its prominence in high-profile benchmarks such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Despite increased awareness, however, there is a pressing need for greater funding, heightened international coordination, and a strengthened political resolve so that access to education becomes assured in all countries.

Making education a universal right is a matter close to the heart of Karen Mundy, a world-renowned scholar of comparative education now based at the University of Toronto. A decade or so ago, when Mundy was a graduate student, she received an award from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) that enabled her to undertake fieldwork for her doctoral thesis.

In conversation with writer Patrick Kavanagh, she recalls how her early teaching experience in Zimbabwe and subsequent academic research led to her current concern with how the international community as a whole can provide a stable platform for education in developing countries.

by Patrick Kavanagh

Karen Mundy was a Canadian university graduate teaching in a rural high school in Zimbabwe in the late 1980s, trying to decide what next to do with her life. Mundy figured out what to do: today, she is a leading figure in the field of comparative education and international development. As her three years in Zimbabwe were winding up in 1988, friends urged her to go to graduate school. She enrolled in the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE/UT) where — with the assistance of an IDRC research award — she earned her PhD. For six years she taught at California's Stanford University and built a reputation as an energetic researcher and innovative thinker. Along the way she co-authored an influential book on education reforms in sub-Saharan Africa that was published in 2002.

These days Mundy is back at OISE/UT, as Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair, Global Governance and Comparative Education, and Co-Director of the Comparative International and Development Education Centre. She also heads a graduate program in comparative education that attracts talented young Canadians from across the country. (A number of Mundy's students have followed in her footsteps by successfully competing for IDRC research awards.)

In addition, Mundy took on a lead role as “anchor” of the Canadian Global Campaign for Education (GCE) Alliance, a collaborative venture involving education researchers and nongovernmental organizations, when it was founded late in 2004. She is also a principal researcher on a multicountry study of civil society participation in the education sector, funded jointly by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and IDRC.

Mundy went to Zimbabwe under the auspices of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC), a nongovernmental organization that aims to foster human development and global understanding through education and training. “I always had a very strong feeling of wanting to help others,” she says. “At the same time, I’ve always loved books and reading. Those things came together in a wonderful way for me in that I was able to have a career that combined working in aid of others and working with knowledge.” She spent three happy years teaching English and history at a secondary school in Masvingo Province.

Although that experience was positive, it opened her eyes to some wider issues: “Certain things bothered me there. Even though I was just a humble teacher, I began to ask questions such as: Was the wider educational policy of the Zimbabwean government affordable?”

Critical questions

These questions fueled her doctoral studies on the sociology of education. The fieldwork toward her dissertation, which examined Canada's official development assistance (ODA) for education in sub-Saharan Africa, was funded by a grant from IDRC's Young Canadian Researchers Award. Since replaced by the [Doctoral Research Awards](#), the Young Researchers award supported graduate-level fieldwork in developing countries on topics reflecting IDRC's research priorities.

Mundy credits the IDRC award with helping launch her career: “Without the grant, I would not have been able to fund part of the fieldwork. The award had an enormous impact in that I was able to go back to southern Africa and research the kinds of questions that were raised for me when I was a teacher there: What are we doing here? Why do we do it? Do we do it well? What should we be doing?”

Mundy’s speech is laced with such rapid-fire questions. In fact, she seems less concerned with immediately drawing firm conclusions than in making sure that the right questions are being asked.

Education and global governance

In recent years Mundy has broadened her interests beyond Canada and Canadian ODA to look at how other donor countries and international organizations influence education policies in developing societies. When asked what innovations she has brought to her field, she mentions the lines of inquiry she is determined to open up: “The main innovation that I’ve been pulling together is to start thinking about education as part of a world system rather than as something contained within each nation.”

Until now, she says, education has been studied primarily as a problem for nations. The time has come to look at it as a problem for global governance. The “compelling issue” for her is the disparate outcomes that different educational systems produce around the world.

“A school looks like a school almost anywhere you go,” she notes. But while some systems succeed in lifting people out of poverty, other systems do not. She worries about the increasingly skewed global situation: “While it may seem fine if everyone in developing countries gets a primary education, what if everybody in the rich countries gets a university education?”

She points out that large multilateral institutions continue to approach education in what she refers to as the old-fashioned way – by tackling the issue one country at a time. She poses to these funding bodies one of her Socratic inquiries: “Are your interventions in education sufficient to address the inequalities that are to be found – not only within countries, but also across world systems?”

In fact, the need for a coordinated international response to the challenge of education – to move beyond piecemeal bilateral solutions hammered out between countries – has recently become a focus of debate at the global level. The Millennium Development Goals feature educational imperatives prominently, and institutions like the World Bank (which was uninvolved in the field 20 years ago) now pay significant attention to the role of education in social and economic development. These changes are based on a new recognition that individual countries are often unequipped to meet the looming educational challenges of the 21st century – that the international community has a role in providing a stable financial and conceptual platform that can support individual countries’ educational efforts.

Questions about literacy

With this reframing of education as a broader, supra-national issue, comes the need to reexamine old concepts and policy objectives. For example, Mundy raises provocative questions about literacy that can easily be misconstrued. When she wonders whether we ought to continue to pursue literacy as a policy goal, she is not suggesting we should abandon literacy as an ideal. Rather, she is saying that mere literacy it is not nearly enough.

“I don't want to undermine literacy at all: it's an important goal. But it is an issue that should be studied. If literacy is our only goal we may be in danger of ignoring the wider gaps among countries. How important is it to be literate in a world where, in order to be well off, one needs a university education?”

“We glorify education, but we never ask: Education for what? In the context of a very unequal global system we may end up saying: Bravo, all the kids are in primary school, but alas, they are no more equal than they were.”

Mundy is hopeful that her work will help to ensure that this important question is repeatedly asked, considered, and acted upon.

Patrick Kavanagh is a writer and editor based in Ottawa.

Further Information:

Dr Karen Mundy, Associate Professor and Canada Research Chair, Global Governance and Educational Change, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6. Phone: (416) 923-6641

[IDRC Doctoral Research Awards](#), Centre Training and Awards Program, Special Initiatives Division, Program and Partnership Branch, IDRC, 250 Albert Street, PO Box 8500, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3H9; Phone: (613) 236-6163 extension 2098; Fax: (613) 563-0815; Email: cta@idrc.ca